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AUTHOR Agatucci, Cora
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ABSTRACT

Collaborative learning strategies can be especially effective in empowering first-year, culturally diverse students to integrate successfully into academic culture. Programs such as San Diego University's Intensive Learning Experience (ILE) link English and study skills instruction to specific general education courses, such as Cultural Geography or History of Western Civilization, creating a supportive learning community that bridges high school and college. Student-centered classrooms, based on cooperation and community through collaborative learning, take the inherent tensions in the academy (tensions between academic and student cultures, between teachers' roles as student advocates/collaborators and as institutional authorities/evaluators, etc.) and make them productive for the student, teacher, and the institution itself. Collaborative learning strategies encourage students to play an active, meaningful role in their education, and present reading and writing as social as well as intellectual activities. One example of a collaborative learning activity is peer response or critique groups. Academic concepts become meaningful in interactions with student ideas and experiences through carefully designed work group and writing activities that value diverse contributions to this interaction. Students can establish supportive peer networks of students working together to negotiate difficult affective as well as cognitive transactions among the multiple communities in which they move. (Thirty-six references are appended.) (MM)

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Cora Agatucci
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Empowering Students through Collaborative Learning Strategies

Collaborative learning strategies can be especially effective in empowering first-year, culturally diverse students to integrate successfully into academic culture and to balance its demands with others students must meet, such as those of family and work. However, the terms of productive integration need not exact the sacrifice of students' home cultures. Nor do I feel that the attempt to establish a student-centered classroom based on cooperation and community through collaborative learning is invalid because it cannot eliminate tensions inherent in the academy itself--tensions between academic and student cultures, between teachers' roles as student advocates and collaborators and as institutional authorities and evaluators, between the goal to raise students to colleague status and the institutional hierarchy which casts students as subordinates. Such tensions and the choices they lead students to make should not be repressed or de-emphasized, but rather made explicit, named, and if possible made productive for student, teacher, and the institution itself. While it is difficult--even impossible within the present structure of the university--to make education truly "reciprocal," as Prof. Knoblauch has put it, "not something done by one to another" (161), that goal is nevertheless worth working for in our classrooms.

To contextualize my discussion of collaborative learning, let me explain that this thesis grew out of four years' teaching experience

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in a freshman retention program at San Diego State University called the Intensive Learning Experience (hereafter referred to as "ILE"). The program links English and study skills instruction to specific general education courses, such as Cultural Geography or History of Western Civilization, creating a supportive learning community that bridges high school and college. Since its inception in 1982, ILE has more than doubled retention of underprepared students recruited through the Educational Opportunity Program of the Office of Ethnic Affairs. My participation in ILE was predicated on three key pedagogical assumptions. First, one should teach academic discourse and culture: investigate and explain it, make its codes and genres and processes and values explicit and therefore accessible to students that they may join its conversations, engage meaningfully in its work, and share its power. An ethnographical approach to this task proved effective for many ILE instructors. Second, the university is comprised of many academic discourses, not a single, monolithic discourse community, although the university may appear as such to students and this intimidating fiction can cause much harm. Most recently Joseph Harris has reminded us in his article "The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing" that the academy houses a "polyglot" of discourses, and this lack of consensus does not preclude the idea of community even as it engenders oppositional discourses within and across classrooms, departments, disciplines, and institutions. Thus, the discipline-specific, content-based packages offered by ILE set out to teach the particular academic discourse as one among many disciplinary languages overlapping and conflicting within the university; in making explicit the linguistic and interpretive conventions of the particular discourse, I have tried to follow

the advice of Lucille Parkinson McCarthy in stressing that this discourse presents one way, but not the only way, of constructing reality (266). Further, by generating multiple discourses among students, peer tutors, and teachers in the ILE classroom, we can dialogize academic discourse, break down the fictional monolith, and open to students the possibility of meaningful participation. In turn, we hope to model for students the methods and attitudes needed to crack further discourse codes and to find ways of working within and against them that will empower our students to succeed in college.

Third, I worked toward ILE program goals aware of the costs theorists like Profs. Bartholomae and Bizzell have warned us students may have to pay. Those particularly at risk, Bizzell urges, are students "whose native tongues are at a relatively greater remove from the academic dialect, whose preferred modes of developing ideas conflict with the linear logic and impersonal posture of academic debate, and whose cultural treasures are not included in the academic canon" ("Arguing about Literacy" 141). We all must be aware that there is no neutral pedagogy: that when we ask students to take on radically new languages, habits of mind, belief systems, ways of making sense of the world, we are guiding them through what may be a very painful process of socialization to college culture that may end in failure or deracination. I am wary now of humanistic conversion rhetoric that claims on the one hand an "eclectic openness of thought to new ideas," while declaring on the other hand an intention to "free the student's mind" of benighted ignorance and liberate her from her "mistaken view of reality" (I quote an article written by a liberal arts educator three years ago)--such rhetoric, whether consciously or unconsciously, dismisses wholesale the languages and cultures new students bring with them to the university. In

these student "texts" after all are the "new ideas" that are essential to continued growth and improvement in higher education. Yet I agree with educators like Nicholas Coles, Susan Wall, and Terry Dean that academic discourses can be taught in a way that respects student histories, motives, and abilities, and that does not demand student cultures be abandoned (Coles and Wall 299). Indeed, Prof. Harris rejects the conception of this process as crossing a border from one land into another, taking on a new language, and being born again. More accurately, Harris proposes that many students are aware of themselves as already implicated in a number of discourses and communities whose beliefs and practices conflict as well as align (19). Teachers, then, might best conceive of their task as "complicating, or adding to students' cultures and languages" (17). We could also apply Bakhtin's dialogic model of ideological becoming: teachers are adding to and complicating the conversations already going on inside students' heads, where value systems and languages continually interact and compete in forming consciousness. Inevitably perhaps, elements of academic culture may present the student with hard choices and painful challenges, just as the student may in turn be empowered to confront and challenge us and the values of our academic communities. In either case such choices and challenges may be clarified rather than obscured, their implications considered thoughtfully and carefully. I would not want to falsify or dismiss the serious decisions my students are sometimes forced to make when they come to college, nor do I wish to serve a hidden agenda of foundationalism.

I turn now to the role of collaborative learning as an empowering agent in achieving the goals I have outlined. How we teach is as

important as what we teach. The instructional method and emphasis send powerful messages to the student about what the teacher--and the institution which she represents--considers "worth knowing," about "how students learn," and about "what the function of the teacher is" in the university (Golub 1). I do not believe that teachers who use collaborative learning strategies should abdicate or deny the institutional authority vested in them. Their authority remains; however, as John Trimbur explains, collaborative learning does move the classroom away from traditional teacher-centered authoritarian education in which students are passive and powerless (93, 94) toward an interactive model that values the resources each classroom participant represents; that encourages students to play an active, meaningful role in their education; that presents reading and writing as social as well as intellectual activities, and "knowledge as 'social artifact,' generated and authorized in the assent of members of knowledge communities" (94). Students can be empowered to join these communities in important ways--even in their first months at college--through collaborative classroom activities wherein they perceive themselves gaining competency, confidence, and control. I have been influenced by such texts as Bartholomae and Petrosky's Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts to design collaborative projects that require, in Mike Rose's words, "a complete, active, struggling engagement with the facts and principles of a discipline" (359); to expect less of underprepared students or basic writers is to perpetuate demeaning remedialist stigma; to require only comprehension, memorization, and regurgitation trivializes the academic discipline as well (Rose 359). Academic concepts become meaningful in interactions with student ideas and experiences through carefully

designed work group and writing activities that value both parties to this interaction. For example, one concept presented in ILE students' Cultural Geography course --that adornment is a cultural language different groups read in specific ways--was tested by student experience and observation and applied in a work group and writing activity in our ILE course: describing, then discussing the ways students interpreted each other's dress and accessories not only demonstrated and validated the academic principle, but allowed students to practice the discourse's modes of analysis and to contribute original insights regarding their own cultures. A more ambitious research and writing project that term sent students in pairs or small teams on a "Walking Tour" of their neighborhood viewed from the new perspectives they were adopting as student cultural geographers themselves. Making a minimum of ten "stops" on their home ground, they were to observe, describe, and analyze its material culture, then present their findings in a written report. The findings gleaned from first-hand research were supplemented by secondary sources and classroom materials, and wherever possible students pointed out connections and divergences among these sources. Students used the discipline's procedures of gathering and evaluating evidence on subjects field workers find particularly meaningful, applied the values and modes of convincing argument favored by the discourse community, and presented their findings using its writers' conventions. In so doing, ILE students not only learned how cultural geographers "make knowledge" in the field, they themselves made knowledge and saw their contribution valued by their teachers. Such activities give students meaningful work to do, lead them to discover they have much to contribute as well as learn, and, perhaps

most importantly, send students the empowering message that their own cultures are worthy of study in the academy.

Another collaborative learning activity I use in my writing courses is peer response or critique groups. In my ILE courses, the process often required extensive modeling, monitoring, and patience to be successful. I do supply specific guidelines and goals for group tasks--such as essay evaluation and revision criteria--a practice some have argued compromises the students' right to their own language and values. However, such guidelines do not simply dictate what and how students will write, but are presented as the conventions of one among many genres used within the classroom and the university. I soon discovered that many of my ILE students were not used to this handling of their own "texts." Peer response groups study student readings and writings, and the procedure presents these texts as worthy of study in the classroom. Students themselves would sometimes denigrate their own or others' texts, often I think a defensive strategy to protect themselves from the consequences of such exposure. But once student authors can be convinced that this exposure is "safe" and constructive, they are quick to understand the benefits of firsthand experience of text-audience interaction, and of cooperative efforts to identify strengths and weaknesses and suggest improvements for revision. Peer Response Groups can be easily applied to writing in genres for specific disciplines once students have been introduced to the "rules of use" that apply and the opportunities for pluralistic interpretation that exist in many genres.

As Kenneth Bruffee has argued, collaborative learning can harness the educative power of "peer influence" otherwise "wasted

by traditional forms of education" ("Collaborative Learning" 638). ILE, for example, establishes supportive peer networks of students working together to negotiate difficult affective as well as cognitive transactions among the multiple communities in which they move, relationships that last well beyond first-year participation in the program. However, cooperation and community cannot be automatically effected merely by throwing students together in small groups, especially in multicultural classrooms, and we must work with students to establish patterns of "peer influence" we wish to encourage. Two components built into ILE have been especially effective in achieving these goals: a one-unit course focusing on affective problems associated with the transition to college life is taught by a counselor and features dialogue journals, discussion groups, and role playing to identify and cope with tensions arising within the group and between the group and members of "mainstream" academic culture; a second one-unit course formally constitutes a study group led by an upper class or graduate student in the field, and enacts cooperative study habits as a means to success in college. The ILE English and study skills instructor quickly discovers that current lumping labels like "Hispanic" and "Asian" obscure the very real differences and cultural conflicts, as well as belittle important cultural distinctions, and do not simplify relations in a classroom that brings together Thai, Cambodian, Vietnamese, Korean, Chinese, Laotian, Afro-American, Chicano, Mexican, Salvadoran, Nicaraguan, Samoan, Anglo, Filippino, and Guamian. Yet the multicultural classroom offers the chance to promote what Paul B. Armstrong calls "pluralistic literacy," built on "the ability to deal effectively with cultural differences and to negotiate the competing claims of

multiple ways of reading" (29); it is an opportunity for students and teachers alike to develop "the facility to communicate their beliefs to others whose frameworks are different and to understand views generated by perspectives incommensurable with their own" (29). Cultural dissonances can cause collaborative learning activities to break down; made the subject for small group or full class discussion, teachers may guide students in confronting rather than ignoring such differences and their implications, and may open a dialogue that ends in constructive accommodation or resolution all can live and work with. Toward this end, Terry Dean recommends that diversity itself be made the subject of multicultural classrooms: for example, writing on and then comparing in peer response groups different cultural rituals, such as weddings, funerals, and New Year's celebrations, allows students to integrate personal experience into academic modes of investigation (for Religious Studies, in one case) and forefronts cultural dissonances that need to be discussed, not denied. The multicultural classroom which uses collaborative learning strategies to open such a dialogue can help students make what Chet Meyers elaborates on as the most difficult of the developmental transitions students must make in William Perry's scheme: the transition from dualism to multiplicity (96-97). And in encouraging critical reflection and open discussion in my classroom, I cannot back away when students apply these operations to my own pedagogy and the ILE program itself. I must be ready and willing to justify course design, assignments, and program goals. It is well to remember that authority is neither unassailable/immutable nor unaccountable if we insist that it involve the consent of the governed. I have renegotiated the curricula in my courses with my students:

I have also watched with trepidation as ILE students constructed a formal protest against a negligent professor, met with the departmental chair to present their complaints, then saw their protest succeed. In both cases, they have assumed positions as adult, thinking, responsible participants in the academy, and engaged in the clash, disagreement, negotiations, and debate that are a normal part of academic political and intellectual life.

As Professor Rose has observed, the American higher educational system has been under constant pressure to expand and open its rolls to larger and more diverse segments of our population for some time, but this "story of increasing access" should not be read as a sacrifice of excellence in the name of democracy (355, 356). Collaborative learning strategies are consistent with a larger program that seeks to use the oppositional discourses already an integral part of academic communities to open the academy to new cultural resources, to challenge restrictive views of canonical knowledge, and to empower culturally diverse students to join these communities as valuable contributing members. Through programs such as ILE, we can invite, in Elaine Maimon's words, "newcomers into the house without striking from their hands the means of making something new" ("Knowledge" 99).

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